

FOCUS

RALPH H. JOHNSON VA MEDICAL CENTER

VA

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WINTER 2009

Blessings of Living

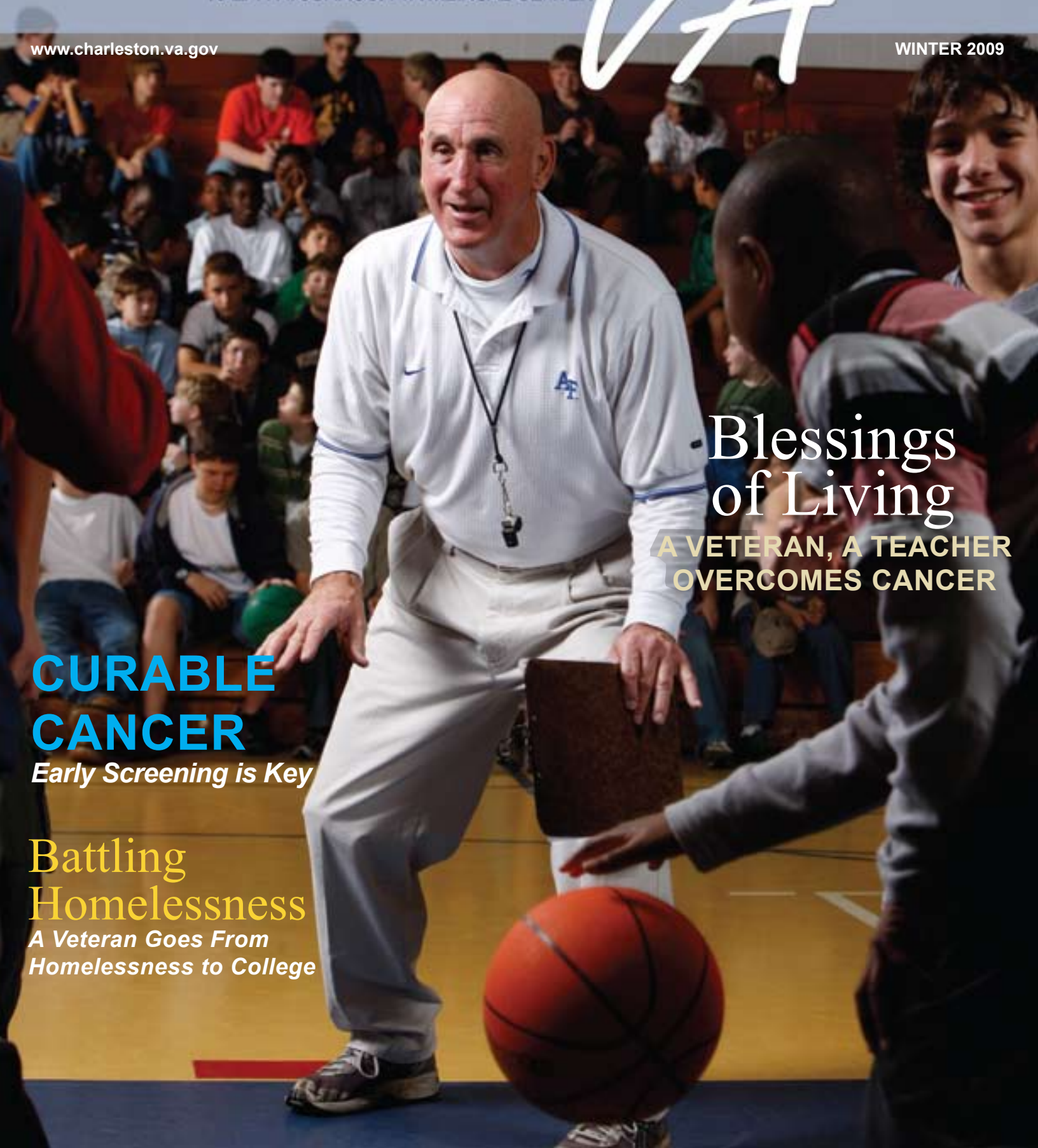
A VETERAN, A TEACHER
OVERCOMES CANCER

CURABLE CANCER

Early Screening is Key

Battling Homelessness

*A Veteran Goes From
Homelessness to College*



director's letter

The New Year is a great time to reflect on the accomplishments of the year that's just passed and to look forward to the goals set for tomorrow. In 2008 the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center reached new heights in patient satisfaction, and national rankings for quality of clinical services and overall performance measures. Now we face the challenge of sustaining our progress and continuing to improve access and clinical outcomes for all of our patients.



“In 2008 the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center blazed a new trail reaching new heights in patient satisfaction, and national rankings for quality of clinical services and overall performance measures.”

That's a challenge we're ready to meet. Our clinic areas continue to grow to meet the needs of our veterans both today and in years to come. Myrtle Beach Primary Care Clinic will soon have expanded mental health space, we continue adding providers and support staff according to your needs, and the new Capt. John G. Feder DoD/VA Clinic will be open in Goose Creek later this year.

And while the rankings are important and the growth is exciting, the thing I am most pleased about is the way our team continues to provide the human touch so vital to healing every day.

Our Stand Down Against Homelessness - the largest ever in Charleston - offered healing for people caught in the trap of poverty and hopelessness. VA changed the life of new veteran patient Ike Bullard in his battle against colon cancer. And Chaplain (Maj.) John Painter worked to heal the nation of Iraq during his four-month deployment.

These are just a few of the VA stories you will find in this issue of *Focus VA*. Read on and celebrate the year just passed and the year ahead with us.

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To view *Focus VA* online visit
www.charleston.va.gov.



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Charleston VA Clinical Quality RANKED #2 IN NATION



Sen. Jim DeMint presented the South Carolina On the Move Award to employees of the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center on August 13th. The award is in recognition of the VAMC's top ten ranking among 153 VA facilities nationwide, and the #2 ranking nationwide in clinical quality of care.

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has surpassed 151 of the 153 VA's across the country, ranking #2 for quality of clinical care and #10 overall in the August 2008 release of metrics used to measure quality, patient satisfaction and access in the world's largest healthcare network.

Charleston's VA has realized a meteoric rise in the ranking since the end of fiscal year 2006 when it was ranked 79th overall. Expanded access to services and working with partners like Naval Health Clinic Charleston and Medical University of South Carolina to bring the latest medical treatments and technologies to veterans in the Lowcountry are just a few strategies that led to the high ranking.

Recently expanded services include audiology at the Naval Health Clinic, TomoTherapy cancer treatment through a sharing agreement with MUSC's Hollings Cancer Center, 24-hour emergency room services at the main campus hospital, tele-health services that bring help closer to home for veterans suffering from PTSD and other mental illnesses, and additional Seamless Transition Team staff to reach out to returning combat veterans.

"The truth is that the Charleston VA has always provided excellent medical care," said John Barilich, director of the Charleston VAMC. "Now we're proving it through our performance measure results."

The Veterans Health Administration has stressed the importance of producing meaningful measures. VHA has measures related to cancer care, hypertension, cardiovascular, pneumonia, diabetes, substance abuse, preventative measures, wait times, patient satisfaction, surgical care, tobacco use, resident supervision, immunizations, mental health homeless measures and financial indexes.

Information about stroke care, elder care, skin care, obesity, depression, PTSD, alcohol use, suicide and traumatic brain injury are being collected in preparation for development of the 2009 performance measures.

"The truth is that the Charleston VA has always provided excellent medical care. Now we're proving it through our performance measure results."

John Barilich, Director

STATE-OF-THE-ART MOBILE MRI

Rolls into Lowcountry

“The Charleston VAMC and the NHCC are each strong healthcare organizations. But together, we are even stronger.”

— John Barilich, Director

A sleek new state-of-the-art mobile MRI is now capturing high quality digital images to diagnose medical issues for veterans and military beneficiaries alike thanks to a growing partnership between the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center and the Naval Health Clinic Charleston (NHCC).

“The Charleston VAMC and the NHCC are each strong healthcare organizations. But together, we are even stronger. Together we will proudly serve our veterans, our military members, our beneficiaries – our heroes – for generations to come,” said John Barilich, director of the Charleston VAMC.

The MRI features the latest technology and the highest level magnet and coils in Charleston. The MRI was dedicated in a ceremony held at NHCC on October 24, 2008.

“Ensuring that our DoD and VA beneficiaries receive the best, most comprehensive healthcare is our number one priority,” stated NHCC Commanding Officer, Captain Celia Horton. “Providing patients with resources like this new MRI is one way we’re making world-class healthcare even better across the continuum of service – DoD and veteran.”

The MRI joint venture - the first of many local sharing opportunities for DoD and VA - is the result of the Low Country Federal Healthcare Executive Council, established by the VA, NHCC and Charleston Air Force Base 437th Medical Group in 2006. The group strives to further DoD and veteran healthcare in the Charleston area.

The Charleston VAMC and NHCC are also building the joint Captain John G. Feder Clinic on the Naval Weapons Station in Goose Creek. The \$41.5 million project will be the new home of NHCC and will include a VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic. Staff will provide services to both DoD and VA beneficiaries. The 188,000 square foot clinic is scheduled for completion in late 2009.

“Today’s active-duty are tomorrow’s veterans. It is our job to ensure that the transition from active-duty to veteran status is as seamless as possible. We look forward to working more with the Navy and other military in the area to further develop the healthcare system available for our veterans and our military members,” said Barilich.



The Mobile MRI stationed at the Naval Health Clinic Charleston offers the latest medical technology for veterans and DoD beneficiaries in the Charleston area.



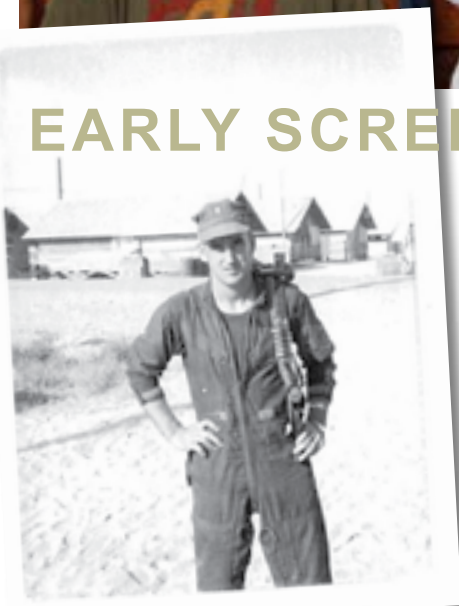
LCDR Scott J. Habakus (left), director for Clinical Support Services, Naval Health Clinic Charleston; Col. James Loe, Deputy Commanding Officer, 437th Airlift Wing Medical Group; Capt. Celia Horton, Commanding Officer, Naval Health Clinic Charleston; and John Barilich, director, Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center cut the ribbon that marks the opening of a joint DoD/VA Mobile MRI.

More to Give

A VETERAN, A TEACHER OVERCOMES CANCER



EARLY SCREENING HELPED SAVE HIS LIFE



In 1968, Ike Bullard served as a Marine Corps chopper pilot in Vietnam.

Thinking back on his life experiences, Ike Bullard said, “I’ve been a blessed guy.” And some of his life experiences include being shot in the leg in Vietnam, being in a car that rolled seven times, and most recently being diagnosed with colon cancer.

In 1968, Bullard was a Marine Corps helicopter pilot in Vietnam flying troop extract missions. There were times where his helicopter had up to 100 rounds in it, making it look more like a sieve than a chopper. On a mission in August 1968,

a bullet hit Bullard this time—right in the leg. He and three other injured men made it back in time to the medical unit. Bullard was awarded the Purple Heart for his bravery.

After the Marine Corps, he spent 13 years as a businessman before he realized he wanted to coach and teach kids. And at age 38, that’s what he did.

“I just knew my new call to duty was working with young people and athletes,” said Bullard.

He was a high school football player (it was in high school when he walked away from the car accident where his 1957 Ford station wagon rolled seven times). He also played defensive back at East Carolina University, where he went with a VA scholarship.

So it’s no surprise he did well as a football coach for the years to come—starting as a coach at Porter-Gaud in Charleston, SC, to his current coaching position at Fort Dorchester High School in North Charleston, SC. His love of sports also led him to serve as a chaplain for the Charleston Riverdogs and the South Carolina Stingrays.

However, Bullard spends most of his

time as a gym teacher, a mentor and so much more at Gregg Middle School in Summerville, SC.

“He does a lot for our school,” said Gregg MS Principal Lori Phillips. “He goes above and beyond to make this school great and to help our kids.”

While at Gregg MS, a retired Navy veteran who volunteers there encouraged Bullard to check out the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center to see if he could qualify for a free physical due to his time in Vietnam and exposure to Agent Orange.

“The VA has been part of my entire life starting with my dad’s experience,” said Bullard. During World War II, his dad suffered a head injury, and was 100% service connected. “I didn’t know about my benefits, but I decided to check it out.”

In April 2007, Bullard went to the VA and got his free physical. Everything checked out great, except his cholesterol was a little on the high side. As part of the routine check-up, he did a take-home fecal occult blood test (FOBT), which tests for blood in the stool. He mailed it in, not thinking much about it.

“We just didn’t think it would happen to us. I didn’t expect the colonoscopy to turn into anything.”

Sharon Bullard

The test results came back showing there was blood, and that a colonoscopy was necessary. Not excited about the procedure, Bullard pushed it back to December 2007—after football season.

“I didn’t really want to do the colonoscopy, but I had a friend who found out too late that he had colon cancer,” said Bullard. “The fear of getting a colonoscopy is nothing compared to finding out it’s too late.”

On December 21, 2007, he had the colonoscopy and found out he had Stage 2 colon cancer. He had two tumors, and needed two operations to remove them so that he wouldn’t need a colostomy bag.

“We just didn’t think it would happen to us,” said his wife Sharon of 32 years this January. “I didn’t expect the colonoscopy to turn into anything.”

On January 29, 2008 he had his first surgery, and on February 12, 2008, he had his second surgery that required a 12-day stay for recovery.

“The medical care I had at the VA was phenomenal,” said Bullard. “The medical staff and residents were just great.”

On the last day of his stay, the Charleston VA medical center checked 29 of his lymph nodes, and there were no signs of cancer.

“When I found out the cancer hadn’t spread, I was very thankful,” said Bullard.

He and his wife Sharon decided he wouldn’t pursue chemotherapy. The odds of whether or not the cancer would come back were the same.

“We decided that thinking positively and staying physically strong would go a lot further,” said his wife Sharon.

They are keeping a close watch to make sure the cancer doesn’t come back. He has regular appointments at

the VA, including CAT scans and yearly colonoscopies.

“He needs to be here longer—he’s got more to offer,” said Clebe McClary, a Vietnam hero and good friend of Bullard’s who visited him just about every day in the hospital.

Bullard has four sons, Kevin, Jeff, Ashby and Brett. Brett, his youngest son, was with him when he was diagnosed with cancer, and Brett simply asked, “Can it be fixed?”

Bullard thought back on that day and said, “Thank the Lord and VA for fixing it.”

Throughout his battle with cancer, Bullard felt blessed for getting through it with support from family, friends and the community. But hearing from his family, friends and the community, they’re the ones who feel blessed having Bullard in their lives.

Mr. Ike Bullard would like to thank Dr. Ernest Camp, Dr. J.P. Stokes, Dr. Ben Thomas, Dr. Sapna Bazaz, Dr. Gearin Broderick, Mr. Lance Lewandowski, P.A., Ms. Mary Anne Harbit, and all the nurses and staff that cared for him at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center.

“The fear of getting a colonoscopy is nothing compared to finding out it’s too late.”

Ike Bullard



Ike Bullard, a colon cancer survivor, is making sure the cancer doesn’t come back by having regular appointments at the VA, which includes CAT scans.



Ike Bullard, a former Marine, beat colon cancer and now is back to doing what he loves—teaching and coaching.

a Curable Cancer

Early Screening is Key

Colon cancer is the third most common cancer in the United States—for both men and women. In South Carolina, approximately 2,170 new colon cancer cases and 730 deaths from colon cancer are estimated for 2008.

Colon cancer deaths account for nearly 9 percent of all cancer deaths nationwide. Today, though, more people are getting screened earlier, which means new colon cancer cases are decreasing. Early screening can result in the detection and removal of polyps before they become cancerous. People treated for pre-cancerous polyps can be cured with just a minor procedure.

However, there is still a long way to go in preventing colon cancer. When colon cancer is found early, about 90 percent of people survive at least five years after treatment. Unfortunately, only about 39 percent of colon cancers are caught this early.



Surgery is the most common treatment for colon cancer, and can be curative if the cancer has not spread.

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has instituted an aggressive screening program for colon cancer. Since beginning this program in 2003, the Charleston VAMC has dramatically increased the detection of early colon cancer and reduced the number of veterans whose cancer is diagnosed too late for curative treatment.

Dr. Florence Hutchison, Chief of Staff at the Charleston VAMC, has been a champion for cancer screening for veterans. “I had a screening mammogram that detected my breast cancer at an early stage. As a result, I am a survivor for over six years and counting! I know that screening makes a difference. There is no reason for people to die from curable cancers.”

What's Your Risk?

As you get older, your risk for colon cancer increases. More than 90 percent of cases are diagnosed in men and women who are 50 years or older.

Risk is also increased if there is a personal or family history of colon cancer, polyps and/or chronic inflammatory bowel disease.

You can reduce your risk by managing your weight, increasing your physical activity, quitting smoking and limiting alcohol use. Eating a healthy diet low in fat and red meats and high in fiber is another way to reduce your risk.

Getting Screened

Getting screened is one of the best ways to prevent colon cancer. Screening can find cancers at an earlier, more treatable stage as well as polyps that can be removed before they become cancerous.

Most people who are 50 and older should be screened for colon cancer. Adults at a very high risk for colon cancer should be screened earlier. People with high risk include those with a personal or family history of colon polyps or inflammatory bowel disease.

Several different colon cancer screening tests are available. Talk to your provider to find the screening method most appropriate for you.

Fecal Occult Blood Testing (FOBT). FOBT should be done every year, and is done at home. FOBT tests for blood in your stool and requires three stool samples obtained when you are not eating red meat. FOBT requires that you place a tiny sample of stool onto a card and mail it into the laboratory. If the test finds blood, then a colonoscopy is necessary.



Fecal occult blood testing is an easy screening method that tests for blood in the stool. You simply do the test at home and mail it in to the laboratory.

Colonoscopy. A colonoscopy should be done every ten years. After anesthesia, an endoscope (a tube that allows the physician to look directly at the inside of the colon using video imaging) is inserted into the entire length of the colon (measuring up to four to five feet). Abnormal areas can be removed through the endoscope for testing. Patients at high risk should be screened with colonoscopy, sometimes as frequently as every 2-3 years.

If you see blood in your stool, notify your Primary Care Provider right away. This could be something simple like hemorrhoids or it could be a sign of colon cancer. Either way, it deserves prompt evaluation to determine the cause of the problem.

To find out more about screening for colon cancer, see the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force website: <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/uspstf/uspcolo.htm>.

What Are the Different Stages?

There are five stages of colon cancer (0-4).

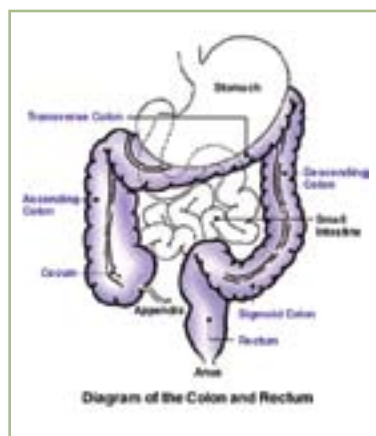
Stage 0 - This is the earliest stage possible. The cancer hasn't moved from where it started in the innermost lining of the colon.

Stage 1 - Cancer has extended to the middle layers of the colon.

Stage 2 - Cancer has moved beyond the middle layers of the colon.

Stage 3 - Cancer has spread to the lymph nodes.

Stage 4 - This is the most advanced stage. Cancer has spread to lymph nodes and other parts of the body, such as the liver and lungs.



Stages 0, 1, and 2 can be cured by surgery. Stages 3 and 4 cannot be cured, although surgery and chemotherapy can slow the progression of the cancer. This is why screening and early detection of colon cancer is so important.



TomoTherapy, the latest in precision radiation therapy, targets tumors with exceptional accuracy while minimizing damage to surrounding tissue.

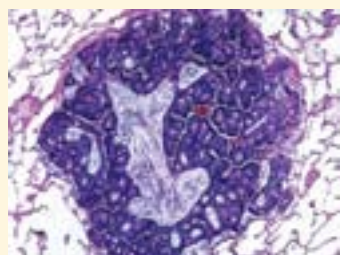
What Are the Treatments?

Surgery is the most common treatment for colon cancer. Surgery can be curative if the cancer has not spread. Chemotherapy (anticancer drugs) is given before or after surgery for cancer that has spread deeply into colon layers or spread to lymph nodes. Radiation therapy may be used in addition to chemotherapy for rectal cancer.

The Charleston VAMC offers state-of-the-art treatment for colon cancer, and is accredited as a Cancer Center by the American College of Surgeons. When colon cancer is diagnosed, a team of highly qualified medical, surgical, and radiation therapy physicians review every patient's case in detail and develop a plan of care specifically for that patient.

Recently, the Charleston VAMC and the Medical University of South Carolina's Hollings Cancer Center partnered to bring TomoTherapy – the latest in precision radiation therapy – to cancer patients. TomoTherapy offers special benefit to patients with rectal cancer. The usual radiation therapy can cause radiation injury to the muscle controlling the rectum with the unpleasant consequence of bowel incontinence (loss of control of bowel movements) or pain with bowel movements. Treatment with TomoTherapy frequently avoids these unpleasant and debilitating complications allowing the veteran to continue to live a productive life.

The Charleston VAMC is committed to bringing the best care available to veterans. Unfortunately, even the best care cannot cure cancer once it has spread, so do your part and get regular screening!



Colon cancer under a microscope.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Colon Cancer?

Colon cancer in its early stages usually does not show any symptoms, but here are a few symptoms to watch for and discuss with your doctor.

u rectum or blood in your stool.

u l patterns, such as diarrhea, constipation,

or narrowing of the stool for more than a few days.

u bloating, or a feeling of fullness or vomiting.

u l

does not completely empty.

u W not trying to lose weight.

Source: VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.



Courtesy: the Charleston Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, www.charlestoncvb.com, 1-800-868-8118.

COLON CANCER IN THE LOWCOUNTRY

A Need for Early Screening

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, Trident Healthcare System, Roper St. Francis Healthcare, and the Medical University of South Carolina are working together to improve all aspects of cancer care in the Tri-county area. Working as members of the American Cancer Society's Healthcare Partners Committee, these healthcare facilities recently compiled their cancer registry data to identify cancer issues specific to the Charleston area. Results found a real need for colon cancer education, screening, and early detection.

Cancer registries are the repositories of a wide range of data for all types of cancer. Covering more than 10 years, the combined data on stage-at-diagnosis of colon cancer shows that 42 percent are not diagnosed until Stage 3 or Stage 4.

The Charleston-area results are comparable to the national results of more than 1,400 hospitals across the nation. Both sets

of results are daunting. The impacts of late-stage diagnosis are major, especially on the long-term survival of patients. According to results from the National Cancer Data Base from 1998-2003, the 5-year survival rate for Stage 3 is less than 50 percent and for Stage 4 is less than 10 percent.

"Colon cancer is a curable disease, but stages 3 and 4 are not curable," said Dr. John G. Allison, chairman of the Charleston VAMC cancer committee.

To reverse this trend of later-stage diagnosis, colon cancer screening is crucial. The Charleston VAMC has employed an aggressive colon cancer screening program for several years. Over the past year more than 80 percent of veterans were screened for colon cancer and most colon cancers were detected in the early curable stages. In other healthcare organizations fewer than 40 percent of patients are screened regularly for colon cancer.

CHARLESTON VAMC CANCER PROGRAM

is Top-Rated

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center cancer program currently has the highest level of approval possible from the Commission on Cancer, a division of the American College of Surgeons through 2009. Only 20 percent of all healthcare facilities have this accreditation.

According to the CoC, the Approvals Program sets quality-of-care standards for cancer programs and reviews programs to ensure they conform to set standards. Approval by the CoC is only given to facilities that voluntarily commit to providing the highest level of quality cancer care and undergo a rigorous evaluation process and performance review.

Recently, the CoC has run a study through the National Cancer Data Base, a joint program of the CoC and the American Cancer Society, looking at the standard of care of adjunctive chemotherapy for Stage 3 colon cancer patients. The study was conducted with more than 1,400 medical centers from across the nation that have CoC-approved cancer programs.

The Charleston VAMC cancer program is the only one out of 17 CoC-approved medical centers in the State of South Carolina that is 100 percent approved. In addition, the Charleston VAMC is one of only three CoC-approved VA medical centers in the nation that are 100 percent approved.

FROM HOMELESSNESS to COLLEGE



"Once I asked for help, the miracles started to happen.

With humility, I listened to those who could lead me in the right direction." — Robert Keith

Joining the U.S. Navy in early 1980, 34-year-old Robert Keith was excited to become a career military man after spending more than a decade on Wall Street. In 1983, his ship, the USS *America*, was called to respond to the Marine Corps barracks bombing in Beirut, Lebanon. In route, the aircraft carrier encountered a typhoon in the Indian Ocean. As Keith was trying to secure equipment, the ship rolled and he fell down a set of stairs and landed on his back.

Diagnosed with degenerative disc disease, Keith spent years in therapy and on pain medicine before he was forced to retire from the Navy in 1990.

After years of having difficulty working and paying bills and hurting from the physical pain, Keith started drinking, which led to other things, and eventually led to homelessness.

"I went into a stupor and started doing things I shouldn't have," said Keith.

While he was living on the streets of Myrtle Beach, a fellow veteran told him to go get help at "the best VA in the country in Charleston."

"I had to get knocked down before I realized I needed help," said Keith. "And once I asked for help, the miracles started to happen. With humility, I listened to those who could lead me in the right direction."

In February 2007, Keith joined the Charleston VAMC Substance Abuse Treatment Center (SATC) program. It wasn't easy at first. He was

angry with the system and didn't think it could help him. But now he's "the greatest Charleston VAMC supporter" and wants to encourage other veterans who need help to give it a chance.

Using the tools the VA provides, Keith feels there are endless possibilities to what he can accomplish now.

Today, Keith is on his way to graduate Trident Technical College with a 2-year Associates Degree in Hospitality Management and Tourism in 2009. He's part of the Veterans Upward Bound program, which helps veterans go to college. The program just recently came to South Carolina, and Keith is one of its first participants.

"I wear a big V on my chest—I'm proud to be a veteran, and this program is for us," said Keith.

The VUB program helped Keith with every aspect of going back to school—from getting his transcripts from previous schools to supplying books, paper and pens.

"I couldn't do all of it on my own," said Keith. "VUB goes all the way to help."

Keith is also on his way to getting an apartment or house of his own with help from the VA supported housing (VASH) program, which is a joint effort by the VA and US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The program provides Section 8 'Housing Choice' vouchers and intensive case management support services to move veterans out of homelessness.

With each door, another door opens for Keith, and he is looking forward to what the future holds.

"I'm always in recovery, and I'm filling that void with positivity now," said Keith. "I'm keeping my mind active and expanding my horizons. There is hope for tomorrow."

Record Numbers

HELPED AT STAND DOWN AGAINST

HOMELESSNESS



Volunteers from local defense, veteran service and other community organizations handed out sleeping bags, blankets, clothing and other assistance to those in need.

“It’s really shocking to realize there are that many people in the Charleston area who are either on the streets or close to it.”

Dr. Hugh Myrick
Stand Down Chairman
Mental Health Services Chief

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center helped record numbers of homeless and needy individuals during its ninth annual Stand Down Against Homelessness held at Armory Park in North Charleston, Oct. 30-31, 2008. During the two-day event, 1,915 people were helped—compared to 1,300 in 2007! Out of that number, more than 530 were veterans.

“It’s really shocking to realize there are that many people in the Charleston area who are either on the streets or close to it,” said Stand Down Chairman Dr. Hugh Myrick, who heads mental health services at the VA.

The annual event, sponsored in partnership with Goodwill Industries, provided medical and dental assistance, clothing, haircuts, job and legal counseling, and food. Breakfasts and lunches were generously provided by the Veterans Canteen Service.

The Charleston VAMC has an active Homeless Veterans program that provides health care, shelter, case management, rehabilitation and employment assistance to more than 100 veterans each day. The Department of Veterans Affairs is the only federal agency that provides substantial hands-on assistance directly to the homeless. In 2008 the VA provided two grants totaling over \$1.1 million to the community to provide housing for homeless veterans and female veterans with children.

One out of every three homeless adult males in the United States is a veteran. And on any given night, more than 154,000 veterans in this country are homeless, approximately 3 percent of whom are women veterans.

In South Carolina, there are nearly 17,500 homeless individuals annually, with more than 5,000 homeless in the greater Charleston area, which accounts for nearly one-third of the state’s homeless population.

Thanks to more than 300 volunteers, the 2008 Stand Down Against Homelessness made a real difference to those in need in our community.



Employment and legal assistance as well as veteran benefits assistance were provided.



Charleston VAMC as well as local dentists provided dental screenings.



Stand Down provided medical assistance, ranging from flu shots to blood pressure checks to even foot care.

REBUILDING IRAQ

BY BUILDING

Hope

"What I'm learning is that I don't have to decide where or how I am going to serve God. I simply have to be available."

VA Chaplain (Maj.) John Painter



Chaplain (Maj.) John Painter teaches several groups of Airmen about Mesopotamian history and provides cultural awareness visits to historical sites in the Ur region.

When VA Chaplain John Painter announced he was volunteering to deploy to Iraq in August 2008 some thought he was crazy. But he wasn't. He was just called to be there.

"Calling is a hard thing to describe," he said, going on to explain that he knew he was led to go but he was putting conditions on where he would like to serve.

He told God he wanted to go to a specific area after the first of the year. But his wife, Stacey, told him she wasn't sure that was what he was supposed to do. So they prayed together and on a sunny day in June as he pulled up to the VA he asked God for a sign. When he walked in the door he was told the Air Force Reserve Chaplain Service called and they needed him to replace a chaplain who had a medical emergency.

Without hesitating he talked to Stacey and made the decision to go.

"What I'm learning is that I don't have to decide where or how I am going to serve God. I simply have to be available."

Since arriving in Iraq as part of the 407th Air Expeditionary Group in late August, Chaplain (Maj.) Painter has done just that ... been available. He has taken on coordinating and leading a dozen chapel events each week including four worship services, five Bible study groups and three choirs. He has helped build

over 150 desks for Iraqi school children. And he has taught several groups of Airmen about Mesopotamian history, leading them in visits to the home of Abraham in Ur.

"Every day there is a different opportunity or challenge," said Painter, who is deployed from 315th Airlift Wing, Charleston Air Force Base. The power to the chapel went out during his first worship service there leaving the congregation in a dark, hot tent. But they had a great service anyway thanks to the large funeral home fans – often used by country churches in the South – sent by a kind soul in the U.S.

"God was allowing me to experience a bit of church South Carolina style," he quipped.

The student desk project has been a particularly good ministry opportunity, according to Painter, who said that many children in Iraq sit on dirt floors in schools with no furnishings. He volunteered along with several other Soldiers and Airmen to refurbish desks for elementary schools in Iraq's Muthana Province.

"The project allows me to literally assist with the rebuilding of Iraq," he stated. "I see that as part of the role the American military plays here." The *Little House on the Prairie* style desks have 4-foot wide wooden tops and backless bench-style seats that provide room for four children each.

"With each desk that I helped build, I pictured the faces of children sitting at those

desks and learning," said Painter. "I even hoped that their education might stimulate them to become leaders of the future in a free and secure Iraq."

With a doctorate in the Old Testament, one of his dreams going to Iraq was to see Ur, the birthplace of Abraham who is an important figure in both Islam and Christianity. He got his wish, and now he provides cultural awareness visits for Airmen to Abraham's home and other sites in the Ur region.

Painter also deals with the persistent chance of a mortar or rocket attack as he goes about his day-to-day duties of counseling Airmen and providing spiritual support.

"This is the first chapel I've preached in that is surrounded by sandbags and concrete barriers," he said. "Yet still, there is the communion table inside with the light of Christ glowing."

Through all of his experiences – including learning to appreciate contemporary worship music with electric guitars – Painter's goal has been to gain a better understanding of what service members and veterans have experienced. He believes it will help him to minister more effectively when he returns to the VA.

But he's quick to say that's not why he went to Iraq.

"Each day reinforces for me the fact that this is where God wants me right now." And he's there simply because he decided to be available.



Chaplain (Maj.) John Painter helps build desks for elementary school children in Iraq during his four-month deployment.

Volunteers build desks for Iraqi children

By Tech. Sgt. Francesca Popp
407th Air Expeditionary Group
Public Affairs

ALI BASE, Iraq -- More than 450 elementary school students attending one of two schools this year in Iraq's Muthana Province will receive refurbished desks built by volunteers here.

Airmen chipped into an effort spearheaded by the Army's 7th Special Troops Battalion chapel to build desks for Iraqi school children, providing two-thirds of the total volunteers, said Army Chaplain (Capt.) Damon Saxton, the 7th ST Battalion chaplain.

"It's important for the kids to get a good education and to have a nice desk to sit in and work on," Saxton said.

The Muthanna Provincial Reconstruction Team discovered about 3,000 rusted steel-frame desks sitting in a warehouse after meeting with the Iraqi director general of education. A PRT staff member contacted the Contingency Operating Base Adder chapel staff here to see if they were interested in taking on a refurbishing project.

"The desks didn't have tops or seats on them and were damaged, but the PRT felt the Army could provide the expertise and manpower to refurbish those desks," said Saxton, who is deployed from Fort Eustis, Va. "It seemed like it was something we could easily handle, (so) we volunteered to take on the project."

COB Adder chapel staff started off with 25 desks to test how long it took for

each part of the process. The PRT provided tools, wood and supplies. Saxton said he and one other Soldier spent an entire day cutting the wood.

"We worked more than 24 hours straight the first day. We were both excited about getting it done," Saxton said. "When my boss saw me with red eyes, she said, 'You need some help.' That's when we called for volunteers."

The call for volunteers went out through word of mouth and via e-mail. Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Defense Department civilians showed up the next day to learn how to rebuild the remaining 125 desks.

"This is a nighttime operation, with most volunteers working three to four hours at a time," Saxton said. "Almost all the volunteers work a 12-hour day and then come here to work on the desks."

Tech. Sgt. Dennis Coffey, the NCO in charge of supply for the 407th Provost Marshal Office here, rallied others in his unit to volunteer with him. He and his co-workers sanded and varnished pieces of wood for the desks, and straightened and painted more than 20 desk frames.

"Each of us has general (construction) experience," said Coffey, a native of San Diego. "Our superintendent built his own house deck. I worked in assembly before I joined the Air Force, and our military police investigator likes to paint. We just combined all our talents, and it worked out better than we imagined."

Saxton said this project was originally

going to be a training opportunity for the Iraqi army, but they were called away on other missions.

"Without the volunteers, the whole project would have been in trouble," said Alex Bennett, a Muthanna PRT governance specialist. "With their efforts and commitment, we've managed to bring the project to life."

Coffey, who is deployed from Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., said he wanted to be a part of the project, because it improves the quality of life for the children here.

"It makes me feel proud because I am part of something really special," he said.

The desks have 4-foot wide wooden tops and backless bench-style seats. The hollow steel frames measure 1 inch by 2 inches. Each desk seats four children.

"They remind me of a 'Little House on the Prairie' desk," said Saxton, who is originally from Emmett, Idaho.

The chaplain estimates the project, which began Sept. 2, will take several weeks to finish. After the desks are delivered later this month, an Iraqi nongovernmental organization will continue to refurbish the remaining desks.

"This will help Iraqi primary school children get better facilities, as well as show that the U.S. military is helping Iraqi community rebuild itself," said Bennett, a Brisbane, Australia, native who has worked with the PRT since April 2007. "Elected Iraqi officials, working with the PRT and U.S. military, can deliver tangible quality-of-life improvements to their people."



Paying Tribute to Our Veterans

VETERANS DAY PARADE 2008



To its biggest crowd ever, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center proudly presented its eighth Veterans Day Parade in downtown Charleston on November 9.

"Hundreds of people lined the streets of Charleston to watch the Veterans Day Parade," said Charleston VAMC Director John Barilich. "The support and appreciation our community has for its veterans is apparent."

Maj. Gen. James E. Livingston, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, was the parade's Grand Marshal. A fly-over by a Charleston Air Force Base C-17 kicked off the parade.

Making their way through downtown Charleston, nearly 1,000 people from 115 different organizations participated in the parade. Nearly 60 motorcyclists carrying the U.S. Armed Forces flags and the 50 U.S. state flags led the parade.

Other participants came from veteran service organizations, local defense organizations, area schools, and other community groups, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, Forty & Eight, Daughters of the

American Revolution, the Marine Corps, Charleston Elks Lodge, and the American Red Cross—just to name a few.

Themes ranged from Supporting Our Troops Then & Now to Military Families Worldwide. The theme of the Charleston VAMC float was Welcome Home, honoring our returning combat veterans.

After the parade, the Lowcountry chapter of the Star Touring and Riding Association motorcycle group served more than 1,200 hot dogs for parade participants and Charleston VAMC patients.

"It's all about the veterans and the patients," said Jim Shumard, Lowcountry Star veteran representative. "It's an honor bringing a smile to their faces. The beauty of this accomplishment is that not everyone is a veteran, but they all can relate to veterans 100 percent."

"The sacrifices made by service members and their families are to be honored and respected by us all for it is our military and our veterans who have fought to protect the freedoms we all hold so dear," said Barilich. "Veterans Day is a truly special time to pay tribute to those who have given so much."

VETERANS DAY PARADE 2008



“Veterans Day is a truly special time to pay tribute to those who have given so much.”

— John Barilich, Director

MYRTLE BEACH PRIMARY CARE CLINIC *Turns Ten*



Ten years later, the Myrtle Beach Primary Care Clinic has tripled its size, providing care to more than 7,000 veterans!

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center provides a full range of patient care services including acute medical, surgical and psychiatric inpatient care to over 40,000 veterans. But that mission is not contained within the main hospital in Charleston.

The Charleston VAMC primary care clinics play a vital role in providing the primary and specialized outpatient services that improve our veterans' health in their own communities. The medical center currently has four clinics – one in Savannah, one in Beaufort, one in Goose Creek, and one in Myrtle Beach.

The Myrtle Beach Primary Care Clinic (PCC) recently celebrated its 10th anniversary in September 2008. The Myrtle Beach PCC serves nearly 7,000 veterans. The number of patients has increased by more than 500 percent since the clinic first opened in 1998 in what used to be the Dental Clinic on Myrtle Beach Air Force Base.

When the clinic opened ten years ago, there was a lot of excitement from both veterans and VA staff. Several veterans wanted to help so much that they showed up to the construction site with toolboxes in hand. On a Sunday night before the clinic opened, about 15 VA staff came together to set up tables, furniture,

lab equipment and everything else needed to open the clinic's doors.

In the past decade, the Myrtle Beach PCC has provided excellent healthcare and has grown dramatically as a result. The clinic tripled its size during its expansion in 2005. The clinic added digital radiology in the clinic, and has recovered all of its costs. Currently, the clinic is in the process of leasing additional space for mental health services.

"If the past is any indication to what the future holds, the Myrtle Beach Primary Care Clinic will continue to grow its patient services to care for this community's heroes well into the future," said John Barilich, director of the Charleston VAMC.

“If the past is any indication to what the future holds, the Myrtle Beach Primary Care Clinic will continue to grow its patient services to care for this community's heroes well into the future.”
— John Barilich, Director

PROVIDING *the Finest Care* CLOSE TO HOME

Charleston VAMC's Goose Creek Primary Care Clinic is #1 in VISN 7 for outpatient satisfaction and the medical center's other clinics aren't far behind.

The scores, which are the result of the VA's Survey of Health Experiences of Patients (SHEP) survey, caused leaders from other medical centers in the Southeast Network to shout out they want to go to Goose Creek for their care at a recent VISN 7 Business Meeting.

"We're really proud of the clinic and their accomplishments," said Charleston VAMC Director John Barilich. "They're doing a terrific job for our veterans."

Goose Creek PCC Administrative Officer Wendy Davis says, though, they really aren't doing anything different except actively seeking input from their patients on a daily basis.

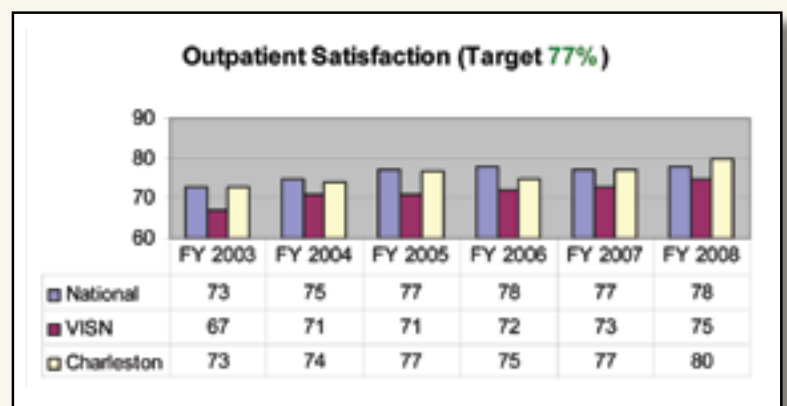
"We created our own customer report cards to find out what we can do better and we make sure to hand them out to every patient at every visit – especially our new patients," Davis said. "We really want to know what they think." Davis also displays SHEP scores and patient survey results in patient waiting areas to foster a greater sense of teamwork amongst patients and staff.

The Charleston VAMC primary care clinics yielded top scores for the 11 Veteran Healthcare Service Standards that are measured in the SHEP survey. In fact, the primary care clinics measured above the regional and national levels for 10 of the 11 service standards for outpatient satisfaction. And the clinics have seen marked improvement in seven standards over the past three years.

The Veteran Healthcare Service Standards include Access, Continuity of Care, Courtesy, Education & Information, Emotional Support, Overall Coordination, Pharmacy Mailed, Pharmacy Pick-up, Preferences, Specialist Care and Visit Coordination.



Goose Creek Primary Care Clinic, ranked #1 in VISN 7 for outpatient satisfaction, actively seeks patient input on what they can do better, building teamwork and opening communication between veterans and staff.



IMPORTANT VA PHONE NUMBERS

Charleston VA Medical Center

843-577-5011 or toll free 1-888-878-6884

Telephone Advice Line

843-789-6400 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need medical advice from their Primary Care provider or have questions about their medications can call the TAP line Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Scheduling an Appointment

843-789-6500 or toll free at 1-888-878-6884

Veterans who need to schedule, cancel or reschedule an appointment for all Primary Care Clinics including Myrtle Beach, Savannah, Beaufort and Goose Creek can call Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Automated Prescription Refill Line

843-577-5011 extension 5220 or toll free at

1-888-878-6884 extension 5220

Veterans who need to request a refill of a prescription or check the status of refills can call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Have your social security number and prescription numbers ready when calling.

VA Benefits (other than healthcare)

1-800-827-1000

Veterans who need information on VA benefits including VA pension and compensation, home loans, and education can call the VA Regional Office.

Billing Questions

1-866-258-2772

Veterans who have questions about a bill received from the Charleston VA Medical Center can call the VA Revenue Center.

For more information on VA related topics visit www.charleston.va.gov.



Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center
109 Bee Street
Charleston, SC 29401

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